

The Smell System (Olfactory System)



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Our Olfactory system or sense of smell allows us to smell the world around us. It enables us to enjoy the smell of food, flowers and other aromas around our homes. It also aids us in detecting danger i.e. the smell of smoke indicating a possible fire.

Our sense of smell is also important in the tasting of flavours when eating food. Although the Gustatory (sense of taste) system is a separate system, it works closely with the Olfactory system to enable us to taste and recognise flavours.

Smell Hypersensitivity

A child who is hypersensitive to smell will often be those that are deemed as 'picky eaters'. These children are often very particular about the types of food that they will eat and will often prefer foods that are bland in flavour. These children will also be very reluctant to try new/unfamiliar foods.

Behaviours that maybe seen include:

- Sensitivity to smells/odours that may cause them to complain of smells that may not be obvious to others.
- Will only eat bland, neutral smelling foods.
- Dislikes certain people or pets because of their smell.
- The sensitivities may be noticed more during allergy seasons.
- May cause more extreme reaction such as being sick due to low tolerance of the smell of food.
- Some children may find it difficult to tolerate being in the same room as others eating due to sensitivities to the smell of food.



Strategies for a child sensitive to smells:

- Limit exposure to smells; help the child be aware of strategies to assist them with avoiding smells that are unpleasant.
- Teach the child calming strategies to help them deal with the overwhelming sensory stimulation.
- If the child has aversions to certain smells, it may be helpful for them to carry around a pleasant smell (in a film container with a hole in the top) to use when bombarded with smells they can't handle
- Use calming smells, such as those recommended in Aromatherapy such as Lavender essential oil.
- Have the child eat their snack/meal away from others eating and in a room where other smells are at a minimum i.e. not in the kitchen.
- Distraction techniques may also help distract the child's visual attention away from others eating.
- Consider the temperature of the food – the warmer the food, the more intense the flavour tends to be.
- Consider other smells commonly found at home or at school that may be too much for the child to cope with – i.e. the smell of cleaning products.
- Familiar smells can be calming to the child i.e. the smell of a parent on a comforter/ favourite jumper.



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Smell Under-sensitivity:

A child may be under responsive to smell. Behaviours that may be seen include:

- May seek out smells, even disgusting or gross smells, e.g. body wastes such as urine/faeces.
- The child reports that all foods taste the same.
- Sniffs people or objects.
- Does not notice strong/offensive smells.

Strategies and activities for children who are under responsive to smell:

- Provide healthy ways for smell stimulation, such as: incense, scented candles, perfumes, aromatherapy.
- Consider alerting smells, as used in aromatherapy such as: peppermint or grapefruit, basil or tangerine, rosemary.
- Take part in regular activities that have a strong smell component – smelly play-dough, playing in fresh-cut grass, cooking with strong smells etc.

